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THE UNRAVELING OF THE CARTER PRESIDENCY



His Brother's Keeper?

The brisk fall wind whipping through the White House porticoes blew Ted Kennedy's mop of Irish hair awry as he stepped from his car to lunch with a beleaguered, baggy-eyed Jimmy Carter. The sky over Washington was as darkly clouded as the president's face. Teddy Kennedy was literally going in the front door last Wednesday as Bert Lance was quietly stealing out the back. Those who remembered campaigner Carter's snarling remark that "I don't have to kiss Teddy Kennedy's ass to get to the White House" were wondering if the president now had to do so to keep his Oval Office.

Lance is gone, at long last. But his leaving raises more questions than it answers. The man whom President Carter proclaimed his "brother" at last week's press conference is now under investigation by no fewer than six federal agencies: the IRS, the SEC, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Federal Election Commission, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and the Justice Department. Bert's troubles are just beginning.

But now, Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan have fessed up to the fact that they had in their possession nine months ago a report describing banker Lance's cavalier use of his depositors' moneys to the tune of \$450,000 in overdrafts. The painfully obvious, lingering question: What

If Bert's three-day telethon for sympathy in front of the tongue-tied Ribicoff committee proved that senators don't know how to ask questions, certainly the Washington press corps's tender treatment of the grim Jimmy Carter who faced them last week proves that most of our Washington reporters can't either. The Washington press corps seems unable to make the leap of disbelief in Carter. Except for two nice tries by *Time's* Stan Cloud and the *Times's* Charlie Mohr, all that the reporters at last week's press conference could manage to do was to supply Carter with the chance to make long, irrelevant, and rambling speeches—speeches filled with those nice little self-deprecatory remarks that are Carter's special substitute for facts when anyone suggests the president himself might be in trouble.

Carter's courting of Kennedy is but the latest in a series of moves to shore up the crumbling relationship between the White House and Congress. There were few pals on the Hill, just those high presidential ratings in the polls, to keep the Ribicoff committee at bay. The sniveling senators muzzled their counsel and sat on their staffs. In a key, closed-door, seven-to-six vote, the committee's Democratic majority decided not to conduct a full field investigation of Lance prior to the hearings of September 15 to 17. The Senate

rebut Lance. Just as Nixon picked the six crises that made him look good, Clark Clifford chose for Lance the nine weakest charges to refute. Lance and Clifford, not the senators, wrote the script.

With Ribicoff defecting *in camera* to the Republicans, the key vote was provided by Missouri's Republican Senator Jack Danforth. Episcopalian Danforth is so proud of his eagle-scout moral rectitude that his curious decision to limit the inquiry was a surprise. It must be his gesture of ruling-class solidarity with a badgered banker—Danforth, heir to the Ralston-Purina fortune, is a genuine checkerboard square.

"None of the senators—Republican or Democrat—were ready to find out more than they had to," said one disgusted staff member, "and Lance made them all look like fools." Bert's biggest defenders were hardly virgins themselves: Sam Nunn, the Georgia senator who benefited from the largess of the same good ol' boys who bankrolled Lance's and Carter's campaigns; Tennessee's Jim Sasser, whose campaign got a hefty loan from the same banking Butcher brothers who helped bail out Lance; and poor Tom Eagleton, whose desperately petulant sycophancy suggested that perhaps Jody Powell had updated the senator's file.

The most immediate casualty of the Lance debacle may be President Carter's Panama Canal treaty: With only 37 votes needed to prevent its ratification, Russell Hemenway, the dapper director of the National Committee for an Effective Congress, estimates there are now already 31 votes solidly committed against the treaty.

The coolness toward Carter on Capitol Hill has never been more pronounced. For the last six weeks, the senior White House political staff has been totally preoccupied with Lance's problems and the crisis they posed for Carter; the massive agitprop campaign designed with the help of pollster Pat Caddell to shift now evenly divided public sentiment toward the treaty has been dangerously stalled by the Lance mess. The hunkering down of the president's young advisers—Jordan, Powell, and Eizenstat—has only exacerbated the White House's inability to win friends and influence senators.